

[Jared Allen and Russell Berman, The Hill](#)

In what may be a preview of the fiscal battle to come, a group of House Democrats criticized their party on Tuesday for failing to back specific deficit-reduction proposals.

"We have been frustrated, quite frankly, with both parties," said Rep. Gary Peters (D-Mich.), who formed a working group with four other Democrats that is devoted to advancing spending cuts. "We can't just be talking about generalities."

Peters and Reps. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), Jim Himes (D-Conn.) and John Adler (D-N.J.) challenged the Democratic leadership to embrace proposals that have specific dollar figures and programs attached to them.

"You have to get specific if you want to get real," said Welch, a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. "Anything other than specific proposals is just generalized talk, and talk, and talk. People rightly are skeptical that it is going to go anywhere."

Under the banner of the Spending Cuts and Deficit Reduction Working Group, the four Democrats are proposing budget cuts that would total \$72 billion over 10 years — a modest proposal for a budget that clocks in at over \$3 trillion per year.

The budget items offered for elimination include select defense programs, agricultural subsidies and tax breaks for the oil and gas industry. The group touted the measures as "concrete, actionable ideas" that could be implemented immediately.

Many of the cuts suggested by the group have failed to make it through Congress in the past. Cuts to farm subsidies have been shot down numerous times by lawmakers from rural states. And the proposed termination of the C-17 military aircraft program has been pushed by the Defense Department for years, with little success.

The lawmakers steered clear of more far-reaching reforms, such as changes to entitlement spending, though one Democrat did say a proposal to cut the defense budget by \$1 trillion over the next decade deserves more consideration. That plan was recommended by a panel led by Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Ron Paul (R-Texas).

"The Frank-Paul approach is asking some very systemic questions," said Welch, who authored the defense portion of the group's spending reduction proposal. "Those are questions Congress should ask."

The package "doesn't really fix the problem," Himes conceded. "It is a down payment, if you will. It's an indication of seriousness. It's an indication of willingness to put some specifics on the table."

Specifics have been largely absent from much of the deficit-reduction rhetoric espoused by Democratic leaders, many of whom have been quick to criticize plans put forth by Republicans. They say GOP proposals are fanciful exercises designed to score political points with an angry public.

Democrats have been particularly critical of House Republican Whip Eric Cantor's (Va.) "YouCut" initiative to find deficit-reducing solutions.

"I agree that every dollar counts — even when we're discussing .002 percent of our debt, which was the size of the first YouCut winner," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said on June 22. "But sadly, this partisan gimmick is emblematic of the way Republicans have behaved in the minority: sound bites, not sound policy. We have hard choices and actual sacrifices to face, and pretending that a series of small items will even put a dent in the real problem is just the false impression of real action."

At his weekly session with reporters Tuesday, Hoyer said he hadn't yet looked at the working group's proposal. While he praised the effort of "four very responsible members of the United States Congress," the majority leader said he wasn't going to endorse or condemn every deficit-reducing proposal that comes before him.

"Any suggestions that are made and positive proposals to look at ways and means to get to fiscal balance, I think, are useful," Hoyer said. "That doesn't mean I support all of them."

But if a seemingly ever-growing group of Democrats has its way, leaders will be forced to pick deficit-cutting proposals — perhaps even ahead of the November midterm elections.

To bring about such a day of reckoning, the lawmakers leading the working group said they would encourage other members to come forward with proposed cuts, and even held out the hope that their working group would become a bipartisan organization. Welch said rank-and-file members of the Democratic Caucus would have to step up.

"What leadership can do is really affected by what the membership is willing to do," he said.